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ABSTRACT

This book offers step-by-step advice for parents on how to choose among available schools for their children. It identifies factors to consider in making the choice, and it offers information on options for parents who do not like any of the available schools, including teaching children at home and working to create new options. After an introductory discussion of why parents should choose their child's school, an overview is provided of the kinds of schools available: neighborhood public schools, public "schools of choice" (magnet schools), other public schools, and parochial or private schools. The middle section of the paper provides advice on each of four steps in choosing a school: (1) thinking about the child in relation to the family and community; (2) collecting information on available schools; (3) visiting a school; and (4) gaining admission for a child into a selected private or public school. Subsequent chapters address when to think about changing schools again and what to do if there are no good schools. The latter options include home schooling, early college for a teenager, and working to change the system. Appended is a checklist for investigating and evaluating schools, along with a set of references and additional sources of information. (TE)

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Choosing a School for Your Child

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U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement

Choosing a School for Your Child

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May 1989

A Word to Parents from the Secretary of Education

Lauro F. Cavazos

Though American education is facing serious problems, we are better off than we were a decade ago, if only because we know that we are in trouble and are beginning to do something about it. We are fully aware that no single cause has brought about our current crisis and that no single action will correct it. But one solution seems more likely than others to bring about immediate improvement—the further extension of the principle of "choice" in our educational system.

Choice in education is nothing new to Americans. In theory, we have always allowed parents to pick their children's schools, though in practice many have not been financially able to choose private institutions or to move into more affluent neighborhoods. In recent years however, we have begun to develop programs that have enabled more and more lower-income parents to exercise the same kinds of options previously open only to higher-income parents. And the results have been happier children and better schools.

The most obvious example of this trend is the magnet school, where young people from widely differing neighborhoods and backgrounds come together in a single school because of a common interest or a common need. Magnet schools are working all over the country, and their success has encouraged advocates of choice to devise other applications of the principle to solve current educational problems. We should examine these proposed innovations without prejudice, adopting them when we believe they will improve our ability to educate our children. Certainly the principle of choice is one that we must continue to nurture—and for at least two reasons.

First, the opportunity for parents to choose schools for their children is good for families. It helps them to make decisions based on their individual needs and goals. There is nothing sadder than a youngster in the wrong school—and nothing easier to remedy when other options are readily available. When parents choose a school wisely and

carefully, they make a major contribution to the future well-being of their children. Over the years, most parents have realized this truth, and the reputation of the neighborhood school system has often been their first consideration in choosing where to buy or rent. Now they have even greater possibilities from which to choose.

Second, choice is also good for schools. The more options open to young people and their parents, the more competitive each school must be in order to attract its fair share of students. When they are offered genuine choices, most people can determine which schools are best able to meet their needs, and those schools that are least desirable will eventually be forced to improve. This application of free market principles to our educational system can do for our schools what it has done for our economy—to the enrichment of students, teachers, staff, and administrators.

However, these benefits to families and schools will not accrue unless people make careful and intelligent choices. If parents do not ask questions or gather information—if they make decisions based on irrelevant considerations—then no one will be served by the new opportunities afforded them. Children will not be happier and more productive. Schools will not improve.

On the other hand, if parents truly make decisions based on the best information, then everyone will benefit. In order to help parents make these choices, the Department of Education has prepared *Choosing a School for Your Child*. This booklet is designed to help you ask the right questions and gather the right information. We hope that you will find it useful in choosing a school for your child. Ultimately the future of our educational system may depend on millions of parents like you, making responsible choices in an increasingly free society.

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Choosing a School

Since relatively few school districts feature formal choice programs and since the options for school choice vary when they are available, parents may not know where to turn for advice. This booklet offers step-by-step advice on how to choose among the schools available to your child. It identifies important factors you may want to consider before making a decision. It also offers information on options for parents who do not like any of the available schools, including teaching children at home and working to create new options.

Parents can exercise choice in many ways. The most common may be in deciding where to live: one mother reports that when she moved, "Every time I looked at a house, I looked at the local school, too." In many areas, public school systems provide some options, including public "schools of choice" or policies that allow a child to transfer to another school or district. Selecting a private or church-affiliated school is another familiar way to choose.

Why Should You Choose Your Child's School?

No one cares more about your child's welfare than you do, and no one else will be more careful to see that your child is well educated and well treated in school. You may also know more about your child's special traits: strengths that need a school that builds on them, weaknesses that need extra support, interests that light up your daughter's eyes, family values that your son's school should respect.

One mother selected a particular public school because she found that its teaching philosophy was right for her child. "Some schools figure a child needs a lot of support, while others expect and assume the child will exercise considerable responsibility," she explained. "For my son, the chance to explore has been very important."

A father reports that his daughter's difficulties learning to read led him to take a closer look at the school where she attended first grade. "When we visited, the school just seemed to lack organization and discipline. We were very unsatisfied." After some searching, he found a parochial school a few miles away which offered a more structured program. The daughter made rapid progress after transfer-

ring, confirming her father's confidence in her abilities and his belief that the first school had been wrong for her.

Another parent had daughters who were bright but learning-disabled. "They needed schools that could be flexible in coping with their intellectual level without doing emotional damage, without making them doubt their real abilities," she comments. "I visited every school we considered to make sure we could find that."

Still another parent noticed emotional changes when her child started high school. "He seemed vague, disengaged, even foggy. He seemed lost in the large, impersonal program and his grades slipped." He is now enrolled in a small private school, working closely with several teachers. He is thriving in the more intimate environment. His mother believes the size makes the difference; "I think the teachers at his old school were as able as the ones he has now, and they tried hard. But in that big setting, they simply couldn't always make personal contact."

Choosing your child's school may also make you more confident that your children will be taught effectively and treated fairly. After Buffalo, New York, instituted a public school magnet program, one parent explained its importance this way:

"I think the magnet program as a whole in this city is the greatest thing that has ever happened to us—seriously. The reason I say that is because we—and I have to speak here as a minority person—we were wondering whether other schools, the non-minority schools, were maybe getting more equipment or better teachers. And I have the feeling this might have been true. As a result of desegregation and the magnet schools, parents here feel we have more control over what's going to happen to our children. . . . For people like myself who have choices and have made choices, we not only feel better about the system because we have choice but because we think the quality of education has improved greatly—even in the non-magnet schools—because everyone is trying to provide programs that will make schools attractive."

Finally, remember that it is your right to decide what school your child attends. Because your liberty is protected by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the

United States Constitution, the government cannot force you to send your children to any particular school, although you can be required to see that your child is educated. In *Pierce* v. *Society of Sisters*, the Supreme Court upheld parents' constitutional right to select a church-affiliated or private school; because "the child is not the mere creature of the state," parents cannot be compelled to send their children to public schools. In addition, since you have the right to choose where you live, you can leave a district or State and move to another school system.

Giving your child a good start in life is one of the most important responsibilities you will ever have. Providing a good home, rearing your child to be a responsible person, and making sure your child works hard and productively in school are three ways you exercise that responsibility. Choosing your child's school carefully is another way you can help your child achieve all that he or she can.

What Kinds of Schools Are Available?

If all schools were the same, there would be no point in choosing among them. In this country, however, there are many different sorts of schools, with differences in what they teach, how they teach, and how well their students learn. Each region provides different options, and you will have to explore to find the various kinds of schools in your area. This section describes some you may find.

Your Neighborhood Public School

In many public school systems, children attend a school in their neighborhood, according to an assignment system worked out by the school district. Attending a neighborhood public school can make it easy for your child to get to school and to visit friends. If your neighborhood provides a supportive community and the school offers a good program that meets your child's needs, a neighborhood school can be terrific.

Public "Schools of Choice"

In an increasing number of districts, you can choose to send your child to a special public school. These schools of choice are often called "magnet schools" or "alternative schools." Parents from all over the district can ask to

have their children attend. If too many children apply, the district may admit children in the order they applied, by drawing names from a hat, or through some other selection mechanism. Racial integration may be one of the factors considered by the school system in such admissions.

While only a minority of school districts now formally offer schools of choice, the number is growing. Included are large cities such as Buffalo, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Portland, St. Paul, and some sections of New York City, and smaller communities such as Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Montclair, New Jersey. Many other systems feature a few schools of choice, while still running most of their schools on a neighborhood or attendance basis.

Public schools of choice often emphasize a particular subject or have a special philosophy of education. One might emphasize science, art, or language study. Another might offer a firm code of conduct, a dress code, and a rigorous traditional academic program.

Other schools of choice may be designed to serve particular kinds of students. In many areas, students and their parents can decide whether to enroll in a vocational education program or school. There may also be within the public school system an alternative school designed to respond to students insufficiently challenged by the regular school program or likely to drop out. These schools, often small and informal, work hard to make students feel they "belong." Some States, including California, Oregon, and Washington, also offer "second chance clinics" for students who have dropped out of regular schools and now want to complete their education.

"Schools of choice" are an increasingly popular idea. In a 1987 Gallup poll, 71 percent of the public said that parents should have a choice among local public schools. Expanded public school choice is also recommended in the National Governors' Association's 1986 report on educational improvement, *Time for Results*. In some districts, offerings cannot grow fast enough to meet parent demand; in Prince George's County, Maryland, some residents wait in line for days to get their children admitted to popular magnet programs.

Other Public Schools

Even if your district does not offer schools of choice, you may still want to investigate public schools around your home. One may be academically stronger than your neighborhood school, or have a special program which would be ideal for your child, or have a philosophy of teaching better suited to your family's values.

Getting your child into a nonneighborhood school may require extra effort. Still, it can often be done. Under Step 4, there is detailed information on what you may need to do to change the public school your child attends.

Church-Affiliated and Other Private "Schools of Choice"

In addition to public schools, there may be a variety of church-affiliated and other private schools available. These schools are all "schools of choice;" they were set up to accommodate parents' differing beliefs about how their children should be educated. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 12.6 percent of American school children attended such schools in 1985.

The majority of nonpublic schools are affiliated with a denomination, local church, or other religious organization. Many—but not all—are referred to as "parochial schools." The largest group is the Roman Catholic parochial school system. Lutheran, Calvinist, and other Protestant schools have been expanding in recent years. Jewish, Moslem, and Buddhist groups have also started schools in some communities.

There are also many private schools without a religious affiliation. Some private schools are traditional preparatory schools designed to train students for college; these often have an elite reputation and a long history. Others may be "alternative" schools set up for families and children who may be dissatisfied with various aspects of conventional schools.

Private schools are increasingly common in minority neighborhoods. These schools provide an option for parents when nearby public schools fail to educate their children satisfactorily. A 1987 report analyzed 75 such independent schools around the country organized by

minority parents and other citizens to provide better schooling in their communities.

Step 1: Thinking About Your Child and Your Family

Start your search for the best school by thinking about what you want a school to do for your child. After all, you know your son or daughter better than anyone else does.

Your Child's Personality

First, think about your child's personality. What is the youngster like? Children who thrive on exploration and responsibility might flourish in an open school or an alternative school. Other students fare better in a traditional school, with closer direction and supervision from the teachers. Both kinds of schools can provide a rich curriculum and a firm foundation; the choice should depend on which situation your child will respond to best.

Another factor is your child's school experience to date. A child who is bored in school may need more challenging work. If your child has had difficulty keeping up, you will want a school with a strong commitment to helping every student learn. The best schools will build on your child's academic strengths and be able to help with any academic difficulties.

How does your child respond to large and small groups? Some youngsters might "fall through the cracks" in a large school; like one child described earlier, some students do best in the more intimate atmosphere of a small school. Other students can gain from attending a larger school which can offer a program closely tailored to their needs.

Values

You should also consider your family's beliefs, values, and morals. One mother moved her children to a new school because she found that "Sometimes a school's values are just not yours. I've heard of differences about religion, about the importance of money, or about teenage use of alcohol." You may want to look for a school which will work with you to develop the values and character traits you want your child to acquire.

Community Ties

Children learn better when their school is supported by a strong community—a group of adults who know each other and work together to help all their children. Your family's community ties can be an important factor in choosing a school. If you and your children have many friends who live close to your home, a neighborhood school can be especially good. For other families, however, a religious group may be the most important community organization and may include families from many nearby towns.

Still other families find their social and community ties in other ways. As one mother explained the choice of her children's school: "I knew that the president of my sorority was the assistant principal, and there were other parents I was very comfortable with who were concerned about all of our children. My son now has a group of friends who compete academically, so they all work hard, and I think it's good for all of them. That's what I have in my new town, and that's what I like about it." A school which builds on a community this strong can be a very fine one for your child.

In short, your first step in choosing a school for your child should be thinking about what is right for your child and your family. Your child's personality and past school work and your family's values and community life are all factors you may want to consider. The sections that follow offer suggestions on how to find a school that matches those considerations.

Step 2: Collecting Information on Available Schools

If you were looking at cars, vacuum cleaners, or refrigerators, you could quickly find information in consumer magazines and other published resources. Investigating schools is not quite so easy; you may have to make phone calls, collect written material from different schools, and look for reports in your local paper to get the information you need. The hard work will be worth your while if you find a school that brings out the best in your child.

You will probably find that you do not need every type of information suggested in this section to make a decision.

Some questions mentioned here may not seem important to your personal situation. Use your judgment in deciding what you need to know to make a thoughtful choice.

Start Early

If possible, start your investigation a year before you want your child to enroll at a new school. It may take some time to find schools that suit your needs; you will want to obtain written information, visit those schools, make a final choice, and have time to get your child admitted for the fall. Some schools stop accepting applications as early as January or February.

Curriculum

You will certainly want to know what the school will teach your child. Does it give enough focus to the basics? Is the curriculum enriched with any special programs that would be good for your child?

Elementary School

A good curriculum for an elementary school might include the elements former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett identified in his report entitled *First Lessons*. Secretary Bennett urged that reading be considered the "sublime and most solemn" responsibility of elementary schools. He then argued that schools also need to teach writing, and to emphasize problem-solving in math, hands-on work in science, and history, geography, and civics in the social studies curriculum. He further recommended that children be exposed to foreign languages, computers, music, and art during their elementary years.

High School

For high school, you might look for the elements recommended by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. In their 1983 report, *A Nation At Risk*, the Commission recommended that all students who seek a high school diploma should be required to take:

- **4 years of English** courses that emphasize our literary heritage and require students to understand, discuss, and write effectively about what they have read.

- **3 years of mathematics** courses that include an understanding of algebra, geometry, probability and statistics, and that teach students to apply math to everyday problems.

- **3 years of science** that cover the major concepts and methods of the physical and biological sciences along with their applications to our lives.

- **3 years of social studies** that explain our economic and political systems, the differences between free and repressive societies, and "the broad sweep of ancient and contemporary ideas that have shaped our world."

- **1/2 year of computer science**

- **2 years of foreign language study** for all college-bound students.

Another, more detailed suggestion for a rigorous program can be found in *James Madison High School: A Curriculum for American Students*, a report in which Secretary Bennett suggested model course offerings to provide students with "a broad, deep, and effective core curriculum."

Fields of Study

Some schools may emphasize specific subjects. Schools of choice are especially likely to stress a special field or topic, such as math and science, performing arts, international commerce, or communications. Religious teaching and moral development are likely to be a part of the focus in church-affiliated schools, and some private schools may provide extra study of the ethnic heritage shared by many of their students.

Don't Forget the Basics and the Extras

If a school has a special focus in its curriculum, you should check to be sure that other core subjects and skills are being taught well, too. Asking to see test scores may give you some information; reviewing the curriculum and visiting classes can also help. An example of a successful combination of specialty and basics is the Santa Fe Indian School. At this high school attended by children of many tribes, the attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of the Indian

community are central to the program, but so are rigorous studies in American civics and history, the English language, math, and science. Local colleges provide opportunities for advanced work in math, and programs in Washington, D.C. and the State capitol support the school's emphasis on political responsibility.

Some programs a school offers may not be officially part of the curriculum, but may still be important to what the school teaches. For example, if the school encourages or requires students to participate in community service work, students may learn a great deal about responsibility and concern for others. At the same time, they can learn about local problems and develop new skills. You should ask about extracurricular programs and think about how they could contribute to your child's knowledge and character.

School Philosophy

Schools differ in their philosophies. You will want to find out what beliefs guide a school's teaching. What kind of learning does it consider most important? How does it believe students can learn best?

Two schools may have different philosophies and both be excellent for some students. For example, a traditional or back-to-basics school will provide clear standards and structure for the child who needs them, while an open school may allow extra freedom for a child who can use it well.

Many large public school systems offer an alternative school for high school students who are likely to drop out or who have found the regular program unchallenging. Often these schools are deliberately small and informal; they encourage students to feel like "members" who belong to the school community rather than merely attending. Yet a more traditional school with formal classes and wider offerings can bring out the best in most students, provided that school has high standards, clear expectations, and a well planned program.

Philadelphia High School for Girls is an excellent example of a school with a clear philosophy. Drawing top students from all over the city, this school's goal is to provide a firm

foundation for college and later achievement. In addition to academic excellence, the school trains students to conduct themselves "in a self-disciplined and purposeful manner." The school's motto, "Via vincit qui se vincit," means "she conquers who conquers herself," and staff and students quote it often. Students receive clear guidance in how to meet school standards, including orientation both to rules of conduct and to skills needed to succeed academically. Success is evident: 97 percent of the ethnically and economically diverse student body go on to college, and more than 300 colleges recruit the school's seniors each year.

Some schools can provide you with written statements of their philosophy. In others, you will have to ask the principal and teachers to describe their goals. Most importantly, visit the school and talk to parents to see if the school's philosophy is working well in practice.

Important School Policies

In addition to curriculum and philosophy, you will probably want to know about some other school policies.

1. Discipline. The existence of written rules and clear penalties is one sign that a school is working on discipline issues. When you visit the school, you may want to watch carefully to see if those rules are being enforced fairly and firmly.

2. Homework. Researchers have found that regular homework can significantly increase student achievement. Find out if the school requires homework and how frequently it is given. Ask if teachers check, grade, and return the homework on a regular basis. Some schools also have hotlines to teachers, after-school clinics, or tutoring programs ready to help kids succeed.

3. Grades and feedback. You will want to know how students' work is judged and how often you will receive report cards on your child's progress. You may also want to ask how else the school gives students "feedback" on how they are doing and how they can improve. Are there programs to recognize children who do well in school? Are there regular policies for helping children who are having trouble?

4. Opportunities and incentives for teachers. You might also investigate some of the school's staff policies. Are new teachers paired with master teachers or mentors or offered other programs to help them develop their skills? Are excellent teachers offered opportunities for career advancement? How does the school recognize and reward excellent performance? A good school's policies will give teachers the challenges and respect that professionals deserve.

5. Admissions. For public, church-affiliated, and other private schools of choice, there will be formal application procedures. For other public schools, you should find out the school's regular attendance district and also find out if arrangements can be made for children from outside that area to attend. Step 4 provides additional information on how to get your child into the school you choose.

Proof of Results

Once you know what a school is trying to do ask for some indicators about whether it succeeds. Here are some factors you may want to investigate.

1. Test Scores. Ask for information on the school's scores over the last few years. The school district or the school should be able to provide these to you. If the scores have been going down in recent years, you will want to ask the school's principal why this is so.

If you are told that a school's scores are above the national average, be careful. A recent research report pointed out that "no state is below average on any of the six major nationally normed, commercially available tests." In other words, every State, and most districts, may be able to show you test results showing that their schools are above average. How is this possible? It may be that education has improved since the "national averages" were determined, but it may also be that the test designers set the norms too low at the start or that schools are "teaching to the test."

The principal should be willing to share information about test scores. If an administrator refuses to give you information about test results, think very carefully about placing your child in that school.

Checklist

(Remove from book and make a photocopy for each school you consider.)

In looking at available schools, you may want to use the checklist below as a guide. During your school visit, you can confirm what you heard or read earlier. Once you select a school, you will want to doublecheck the admissions information you collected to make sure you meet all the requirements.

Curriculum

1. Thorough coverage of basic subjects? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If no, which subjects are not covered completely?

_____

2. A special focus or theme to the curriculum? ☐ Yes ☐ No

What is it?

_____

3. Elective offerings (if appropriate)?

_____

_____

4. Extracurricular programs to enhance learning and character development?

_____

_____

_____

Philosophy

5. Emphasis on a particular approach to teaching and learning?

_____

6. Belief that every child can learn? ☐ Yes ☐ No

7. Encouragement of attributes of good character? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Important Policies

8. Discipline _____

9. Drugs _____

10. Homework, how much per subject? _____

11. Homework hotlines? ☐ Yes ☐ No

12. Tutoring? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, by whom? _____

13. Grades, feedback, and recognition: How often? _____

What type? _____

_____

14. Teacher opportunities and incentives?

_____

Proof of Results

15. Standardized test scores: Current _____ Past _____

16. Attendance rate: Students _____

Teachers _____

17. Graduation rate _____

18. How many leave school in a year? _____

Why? _____

19. Special achievements or honors for the school?

_____

School Resources

20. Staff backgrounds and qualifications _____

_____

_____

21. Library? ☐ Yes ☐ No

22. Classroom books for independent reading? ☐ Yes ☐ No

23. Auditorium or other meeting room? ☐ Yes ☐ No

24. Physical education facilities? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, what type? If no, what alternatives?

_____

Parent and Community Involvement

25. Parent volunteers in school? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Doing what? _____

_____

26. Teachers enlist parent cooperation on home learning?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, how? _____

_____

27. Other community members involved in school?

☐ Yes ☐ No

28. Partnerships with local businesses or other institutions?

_____

_____

Reputation

29. Views of parents with children in the school

_____

_____

_____

30. Views of friends and neighbors

_____

_____

_____

31. Views of community leaders

_____

_____

_____

Special Questions for Private and Church-Affiliated Schools

Financial obligations, including

32. Tuition? $_____

33. Other fees? $_____

34. Uniforms? ☐ Yes ☐ No

35. Book purchases? ☐ Yes ☐ No

36. Required participation in fundraising? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Financial assistance, including

37. Scholarships up to what percent of tuition? _____

38. Loans? _____

39. Reduced fees if more than one child enrolls? _____

40. State aid available to families? _____

41. Apply how and when? _____

_____

Other

42. School's age and financial status?

_____

43. Religious instruction and activities? _____

_____

Admissions Requirements and Procedures

For a public, church-affiliated, or other private school of choice

44. List of materials to submit (application form, transcript, test scores, references, etc.)

_____

_____

_____

45. Interview required? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Date _____ Time _____

46. Date school will decide? _____

47. How will school select students?

_____

_____

For other public schools

48. Borders of the attendance area the school usually serves?

_____

49. Does State law give you a right to transfer your child to another public school? ☐ Yes ☐ No

50. Tuition or other charges for transferring students? $_____

51. Facts considered important in deciding whether to grant a request for a transfer?

_____

_____

52. When will a decision be made on transfer requests? _____

53. Names of district officials who can permit a child to transfer to a school outside that child's attendance area

_____

_____

_____

2. Attendance Rates. Another important measure is attendance. Parents should ask about attendance of both students and teachers. A school with a more than 10 percent absence rate for either may have some serious problems.

3. Turnover and Graduation Rates. You may want to find out how stable the student body is at the school. How many students leave the school in a year? How many of those move or transfer, and how many drop out? For high schools, graduation rates provide one indication of whether schools are providing an education their students value. On the other hand, remember that a diploma alone does not tell you what those students learned; gather other information to tell you whether a school's graduates got a sound education while enrolled there.

4. Postgraduation Activities. Some schools conduct surveys to determine how many students find jobs, join the military, or seek postsecondary education. Generally, high schools in affluent areas have a high percentage of graduates attending colleges and universities. However, some urban schools in poor neighborhoods pride themselves on encouraging students to continue their formal education. You may want to pay special attention to a school which sends many graduates from less wealthy homes on to colleges, universities, and technical training and business schools.

5. Special Achievements. Has the school had special successes in recent years? A school you are considering may have received an award for excellence, initiated an important new program, or dramatically improved its students' achievement. Staff members may have been recognized for superior teaching. Successes like these tell you what a school does well, and they may also show that the principal, teachers, and families at that school work together for good education.

School Facilities

Research indicates that fancy facilities do not always lead to higher achievement. Be sure to bear this in mind when you look into a school's resources. Nevertheless, there are some basic features you will want to look for.

A library and classroom books are always important. Children need to read many good books in order to learn

independently and build their reading skills; textbooks are not enough. If a school does not have a wide variety of interesting books readily available to its students, that is a serious weakness.

A parent who has also taught in several schools suggests two other things to look for: "First, a school ought to have at least one large room or auditorium for school meetings, arts performances, and special guest presentations. Second, it should have adequate physical education facilities; the equipment doesn't need to be elaborate or new, but kids should get regular exercise."

School Staff

You should feel free to inquire about the background and qualifications of teachers and administrators, including where they earned their academic degrees.

Ask how many teachers a school has and how many are assigned to regular classroom duty. Find out what any other teachers do at the school. Many public schools today have at least a few teachers teaching outside the field in which they were certified; you should be concerned if a school has a high number of such teachers.

Are there specialists in art, reading, science, special education, or other subjects? Are there librarians, counselors, and teachers' aides? How do their efforts complement those of the classroom teachers?

When you visit the school, you will have an opportunity to meet staff members and learn more about their qualifications, skills, and approaches.

Parent and Community Involvement

Increasingly, research shows that schools which involve parents and other adults have a special ability to help their students. These schools can help build the kind of strong community that helps all children learn. If you are concerned enough to select your child's school, you may also want opportunities to see what goes on there and to lend your own talents and energy to improve the program.

Parent Activities

Find out how parents are involved in the school. Parents at many schools help raise money, but that should not be all they do. In a school with strong parental involvement,

parents often help educators set up special activities and programs. At Doherty Elementary School in West Bloomfield, Michigan, the volunteer motto is "Service to children is the best work in life," and parents are constantly working with students on educational tasks.

Good schools can also work with parents on home activities that will help children succeed in their studies. In Des Moines, Iowa, for example, Greenwood Elementary School parents receive weekly letters describing recent and upcoming study topics in their children's classes. Mt. Abram High School, in Kingsfield, Maine, has encouraged both parents and students to plan for the future by running community forums on the local economy and on future education needs in the region.

Community Resources

Increasingly, good schools also work with other community members. They may draw on various adults as guest speakers to discuss their work or hobbies. In Montgomery County, Maryland, Paint Branch High School has a huge computer listing of willing guest speakers and advisors for student projects covering science interests from lasers to veterinary medicine. Other schools invite senior citizens or college students to serve as tutors.

Local institutions may also have a special relationship with a school, providing valuable skills and resources. In Atlanta, the Harper Magnet School for Financial Services draws advice from eight local banks. In Baltimore, five public schools offer a Math, Engineering, Science Achievement program for minority students; the program is supported by faculty from Johns Hopkins University and Morgan State University. A growing number of cities have adopt-a-school programs, through which a business firm devotes employees' time and other resources to the needs of a particular school.

Successful parent and community involvement is likely to be a sign of a strong school which uses all the resources it can find to help children learn.

Reputation of the School

Friends and neighbors can give you important information about a school's reputation. You may also want to consult community leaders—your city council members, members of the clergy, the editor of the local paper. If you are especially concerned about school safety and student drug use, a call to the police department might also be informative.

Be sure to talk to some parents of children in a school you are considering. What you hear may give you more insight into how a school is really doing than any data the school itself can offer.

A good school's philosophy and program should be well known and much praised. During a competition for recognition of outstanding secondary schools, the U.S. Department of Education sent two site visitors to S.S. Murphy High School in Mobile, Alabama. Parents and community leaders turned out to tell them that "the Murphy tradition" drew many transfer students from public and private schools alike. In Claremont, California, other site visitors heard repeatedly that Claremont High School was competitive—in academics, in athletics, and in its other activities—and that it succeeded in its competitions. The key themes were different for these two schools—"tradition" in one place, "competitiveness" in another—but both schools deserve their reputations for excellent education.

Find Out Why

When you ask about a school's reputation, be sure to listen to the details of each person's opinion. Find out why that person thinks a school is good or bad. A program that was good for a friend's child may not meet your daughter's needs, while your son might flourish in a special program that seemed unimportant to your neighbor's family.

If a school has an overall reputation for excellence, ask extra questions about how it serves children like your own. You may want a school which is ready with extra help when a child has difficulty or which offers enrichment for a pupil who is a little ahead of others in the class.

How a school responds to youngsters from different backgrounds may also matter to you; one father has made this a priority in looking at schools, saying: "As a minority parent, I was determined to see that my children received the same respect and care other students received."

Special Questions for Church-Affiliated and Other Private Schools

All of the questions above apply to church-affiliated and other private schools as well as to public schools. In considering a private or church-affiliated school, you may also want to ask about some additional features.

1. Your Financial Obligations. You will want to know about tuition and when it is due. There may also be additional fees, charges for your child's books, and school uniforms to buy. You may also want to ask if refunds are made if children leave school for any reason.

You should not assume that money will be an obstacle at nonpublic schools. Tuitions at these schools vary widely: for example, in 1985, tuition was under $500 per year for one-third of the students in church-related elementary schools and under $1,000 for another third of them. Many nonpublic schools offer scholarships and loans, and some have discounts for families with several children enrolled.

2. School Finances. Where does the school's funding come from? How much comes from tuition? How much comes from gifts or an endowment? Does the school require parents and students to participate in candy sales, auctions, and other fundraising projects? Some schools are very secure financially, while others struggle to stay open.

You certainly should not rule out a school that has to work hard to survive; it may be working to provide something very special and very good for its students. Still, you will want to know about any problems in advance.

3. Religious Instruction and Activities. In general, church-affiliated schools offer instruction in the religion that sponsors them. Some other private schools also have chapel or other religious activities. You will want to ask about such activities and whether they are mandatory for all students.

Educational Consultants

You may also want to consult an educational consultant. If such a consultant practices in your area, he or she will already have investigated the available schools and, for a fee, may be able to suggest one that would serve you especially well. The local Yellow Pages may list such professionals under "Educational Consultants" or a similar title, or consult the research librarian of your local library. If you are moving to a new location, your library should also have information on other areas of the country.

Step 3: Visiting a School

Be sure to visit any school before you finally decide to send your child there. If you do not have time to visit every school around you, the information you gathered under Step 2 can help narrow your list.

A school visit can be much like test-driving an automobile. A car may seem terrific on paper and in the show-room, but just not feel quite right after you drive it for a few minutes. Selecting a school can be like that: after reviewing published information and talking to other people, you will want to check the "feel" of a school before you send your child there.

A mother who had visited many schools remembers that when she walked into the school she finally picked, "I could see immediately that the whole attitude was different. You could feel it in the words teachers used, the activities children were involved in. There was an atmosphere of great respect for the children."

Arranging the Visit

Make an appointment before you visit a school, calling the principal's office or, if the school has one, the admissions office. You will want to tour the school during regular school hours. If possible, you will want to visit a few classes. To get a real feeling for how the school usually operates, avoid visiting during the first or last week of a school term.

You will also want some scheduled time to talk to the principal and some teachers about the school. Ask for an appointment that will let you do all these things. Attending an open house, PTA meeting, or other school function could also give you valuable information about the attitudes of staff, students, and parents.

Things To Look For

As you walk around a school or visit some classrooms, you should ask yourself questions like the following: Do I feel comfortable walking into the school? How do the adults talk to children? Are they friendly or harsh? Are the children clearly interested in what they are doing? Is the overall atmosphere one that allows students to work hard and learn? Do pupils seem to have opportunity for quiet reading as well as group activities? Are there some areas of the school or some classrooms the tour guide avoids? Does the school display examples of excellent student work? Is the building tidy and well maintained?

In general, schools where students do best are clean, orderly, pleasant places. Staff members in good schools respect each other, their students, and their parents. They speak enthusiastically of the children. Teachers are clearly interested in the subjects they teach. Students are friendly and respectful, and you can tell that they are busy learning. Parents should hesitate before placing children in schools which do not have these characteristics.

A visit also lets you double check some of the information you may have collected earlier. Does the library appear both well stocked and well used? Do the disciplinary rules you read about really seem to be enforced? Do any special programs you were interested in appear to be working well?

Questions To Ask

During your visit, you will definitely want to take time to talk with the principal about the school. Before you go for your visit, plan your questions. From the information you gathered in Step 3, you may want to hear more about certain features of the school.

You should also try to find out what the **principal's priorities** are. For instance, you may want to ask what values the school encourages in its students. What kind of personal character is considered important in the school? How is that kind of character encouraged in students?

You may also want to ask about the school's **curriculum and philosophy,** even if you have already read about them. If a principal does not sound committed to the school's written policies, he or she may not be providing effective leadership to make those policies work.

After meeting with the principal, ask to **meet the teachers** for the grade your child will be in or for subjects your child will be taking. See what they can tell you about the school's program and about their own priorities. Ask about their academic backgrounds and teaching experience, and about how much professional control they have over what they teach. For example, can they select the textbooks their students use or supplement textbooks with other materials?

Listen closely to what teachers say about the school. Do they seem proud of its program and interested in having your child enroll? Or do they make negative remarks about students, administrators, or others in the school? The teachers will be the adults closest to your child, so you will want to know if they are well prepared, dedicated, and happy in their work.

Step 4: Getting Your Child Into the School You Choose

Once you decide on the school, you need to go through the process of getting your child enrolled. What this involves depends on the school. In any event, you need to begin as many months in advance as possible.

Getting Admitted

If you have selected a school of choice, there will be some kind of official admissions process. Your child may need to be tested or interviewed, and you may need to provide a school transcript, recommendations, or other information. You will want to double check to be sure you have accurate information on when and how to apply.

You should also be sure that you understand how the school will decide on your child's application. What will happen if there are more applicants than spaces? Some schools will pick students in the order they apply; if so, you should apply as early as possible. Other schools will consider ability or background or whether a child's brothers, sisters, or parents attended. Still others may use a lottery to choose. You should have plans for your second choice school if the first choice does not come through.

Investigate possible financial help if sending your child to the school you choose will involve extra expenses. At a church-affiliated or other private school, you can ask about how to apply for financial aid.

In some States, you may also be able to get help from the government. For example, New Jersey helps pay for transportation to and from school. Minnesota offers a tax deduction for school-related expenses, which can be used for tuition to a private or church-affiliated school or for extra expenses you may have in a public school. Most private and church-affiliated schools will be able to tell you about such help in your State.

Transferring to a Different Public School

If you select a public school that is not a school of choice, you will have to develop a strategy to get your child enrolled.

Moving Into the Attendance District

One solution, if it is possible for you, may be to move, so that the school you want becomes your neighborhood school. For many parents, the neighborhood school is the most important factor in picking a home. One mother reports that "When my youngest child went to college, I moved without thinking about school boundaries for the first time in twenty years."

If moving is not an option for your family, all is not lost. You may still be able to arrange a transfer for your child.

Does Your State Give You a Right To Transfer Your Child?

Laws in some States give children the right to transfer from one public school to another. To find out about your State's current laws, you may need to call your State Department of Education. There are many different State policies, and this booklet can only give some examples of what you may find.

In Iowa, parents can ask the State Department of Public Instruction to intervene if they feel the local district does not provide an appropriate program for their child. Several parents who recently used this law were successful. The State ordered their district to pay tuition for their children to attend school in a neighboring district.

In Colorado, students who have failed courses for several years can choose to attend another public school in their own or another district in order to give them a second chance at success.

In many States, children may transfer to another district if there is extra room in the new district, provided parents pay tuition to the new public school. In some States, State funding for your child's education will cover these costs if both your old district and the new district agree that your child should transfer.

In some public school districts, there is a special transfer program to allow children to enroll in schools now attended by few children of their racial or ethnic heritage; such programs are often part of a district's official desegregation plan. In other places, transfers are allowed in rural areas to increase the number of programs available to children in small schools.

Choosing a School in Special Education

Federal requirements give parents a powerful but indirect means of choosing a school for children with handicaps. Parents and school officials meet each year to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that lists appropriate objectives and services. The **district** then selects the school where the IEP can be implemented, removing the child from the regular school environment only when necessary. By carefully defining a child's needs and goals in the IEP, parents make it more likely the district will select the school they want. Parents who disagree with the school placement can appeal this decision through a Federally required process in the district and State.

Ask, and See What Happens

In many cases, even if State law does not require a district to allow transfers, local school officials can authorize transfers if they choose to do so. If you offer good reasons, a school district may allow you to send your child to another school even if there is no official transfer policy.

Before you ask the school district, you may want to talk with other parents or to leaders in your community. They may be able to tell you about transfers that have been allowed, and which district officials have the power to grant them. "I find that if you ask around, most districts do have an unwritten open enrollment policy," one parent concerned with choice reports. "Other parents may be able to tell you how to make that unwritten policy work for you."

A school district will be most likely to grant a transfer request if the parent insists and has a special justification. The following reasons have been used successfully by some parents:

- The school I want my child to attend is much closer to the place where day care is available before or after school.
- The school my child has been assigned to is much further from my home than another school.
- There is a special program my child needs or would benefit from at the school outside our attendance area.
- Moving my child to another school will improve the racial balance of the district.
- My child is ready for much more advanced work.

It may be a good idea to start with a letter or phone call to the superintendent of the school district explaining where you want your child to go to school, and explaining why. If your child has had a medical or emotional problem at his or her current school, a letter from a doctor supporting your request will be helpful. Be sure to keep a copy of your letter. If you have not had any response after two weeks, call the school district and ask what is being done.

If a district administrator turns down your request, you may have to go to the school board. School boards rarely overrule their own superintendents. Still, if the change is important to you, you should go to the school board and make the strongest argument you can that your child should be allowed to transfer.

Sometimes it will be necessary to make a "fuss" before your request is approved. The expression suggesting that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" is very true in education. One couple whose twins wanted to go to separate schools reported that "We just went on appealing the decision until we found someone who said yes." Remember that you are working to help your child, which makes the trouble worthwhile.

When Should You Think About Changing Schools Again?

No selection process is perfect. Families sometimes take great care selecting an automobile, only to find after a few months that the one they settled on is still not what they wanted. Or a car which was perfect for years may eventually be too small for a growing family.

The same holds true for schools. A school which suits a child at one age may be less satisfactory when the same child is more mature.

In other cases, the school itself may change. One father reports that his family had originally valued the small classes, as well as a number of other features, at a nearby Catholic school. Unfortunately, as the school grew, those very features became rare, and his son did not get the close attention that had been so good for his two daughters. His son has transferred to their neighborhood public school, and so far he seems to be doing very well. This father recommends taking the choice of a school on a year-by-year basis, continuing to pay attention to how the school is serving each child.

Even if you follow that advice, however, it is probably wise to give the school a real chance, and to work closely with administrators and teachers before looking for a new school. It probably is not in most students' best interest to change schools frequently. Youngsters benefit from getting to know classmates and teachers, and that takes time. Often difficulties can be worked out if you give the school that time, and your child can fully enjoy the special opportunities and features which first attracted you to that school.

What You Can Do if There Are No Suitable Schools for Your Child

You may find that no school seems entirely suited to your goals for your child: there may be no really good options available. In that case, here are some ways you can still improve your child's education.

Home Schooling

Home schooling is an increasingly popular alternative. One researcher estimates that between 120,000 and 260,000 students in this country are now being educated at home. In a number of cases, children educated at home have done well compared to children who attend school, even when their parents were not highly educated. Some parents prepare their own programs, while others use materials sent to them by companies specializing in home-school materials. Of course, exercising this option may require major changes in how your family lives. Teaching your children at home is a very ambitious undertaking.

Different States have different rules on home schooling. Some require parents to register as home schoolers and others require parents to submit a formal curriculum plan. Several States require that home schooling parents obtain a State teacher certificate. If you decide to teach your children at home, be sure to find out what laws you must obey. Your State Department of Education can give you information on this subject, or you may want to contact an organization such as the Home Schooling Legal Defense Association listed in the address list in back.

Early College for a Teenager

If your child is a teenager who is not being challenged by high school, you may want to consider whether an early college experience would be an improvement. In Minnesota and Florida, juniors and seniors in high school can opt to take college or university courses for high school credit under a State-funded program. In other States, you may be able to work out a similar arrangement with your local school.

Working To Change the System

You do not have to assume that the schools that already exist are the only possibilities. If the available schools are not right for your child, consider working to change one of them or to create a new kind of school. You will probably want to work with other parents on this sort of project. You may want to found your own private school or form a school affiliated with a religious institution. Another possibility is to ask the school board to create a public school of the sort you want, while offering to help with the work of making the new school succeed. It may take several years of effort to get the school board to agree.

You may also want to work to change the general policy of your State or school district to create additional choices for parents. Increasingly, choice is a political issue around the country. Massachusetts, Minnesota, Iowa, and Maine are among the States which have taken steps recently to offer greater educational choices, and the National Governors' Association's *Time for Results* report recommended increasing the public school choices offered to parents within the next few years. As noted earlier, polls suggest broad public support for giving parents the right to choose the school their children attend.

Conclusion

Your child can benefit tremendously from your active concern and involvement with his or her education. By collecting information, talking to other parents, visiting schools, and exercising your right to choose, you can take the lead in making sure your son or daughter gets a first-rate education. By staying involved with the program you choose, encouraging your child to work hard, and providing additional opportunities to learn at home and in the community, you can help your child go further still. Remember, it is your right, as well as your responsibility, to seek the very best education for your son or daughter.

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Some Sources of Additional Information

If you have questions about public schools in your area, your telephone directory, the school district office, or the State Department of Education can probably help you.

For information on private or church-affiliated schools, you may want to consult your telephone directory or a published guide to nonpublic schools. For example, the Council for American Private Education represents 14 different church-affiliated and private school organizations, and has developed *Private Schools of the United States*, a directory of schools in those organizations. If a copy is not available in your local library, you can order one from:

Council for American Private Education
1625 Eye Street NW
Washington, DC 20006

Two organizations which are not members of the Council for American Private Education, but which may be able to provide information on their member schools are:

American Association of Christian Schools
P.O. Box 1088
Fairfax, VA 22030

Association of Christian International Schools
P.O. Box 4097
Whittier, CA 90607

The Institute for Independent Education, which developed the study of private schools formed by minority parents and community leaders mentioned earlier, may also be a helpful resource:

Institute for Independent Education
1313 North Capitol Street, NW
Washington, DC 20002

In addition, your local libraries and bookstores offer a variety of annual directories and guides to nonpublic schools which you may find helpful.

For information on home schooling, you may wish to review Patricia Lines' article "An Overview of Home Instruction," in the March, 1987, issue of the magazine *Phi Delta Kappan*, or to contact:

Home School Legal Defense Association
731 Walker Road, Suite E2
Falls Church, VA 22066

Acknowledgments

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OERI Announcement

U.S. Department of Education • Office of Educational Research and Improvement

Programs for the Improvement of Practice

For Release May 19

May 1989

New Book for Parents, *Choosing a School for Your Child*

Choosing a school: For one parent, it is the first thing she thinks of every time her family moves. For another, it means finding a smaller school for his son who is not doing well in the large school he currently attends. A couple are looking for a new school because their daughter is very talented in science, and they want a school that will challenge her.

While a number of legislative actions on the issue of school choice are currently under consideration, there are options for your children now. Parents can learn what these options are in *Choosing a School for Your Child*, a new book just published by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. *Choosing a School for Your Child* takes you step by step through the process of finding the best school for your child. It also includes a checklist of questions to ask when you first request information from a school as well as when you visit.

Your first step is to look closely at your child and your family. Is your child an independent worker or the type who needs a lot of structure? Is a close relationship with the teacher a necessary part of learning? Is the challenge of competition important, or will your child learn better independently? Is your family strongly based in the neighborhood, or are your ties more with your church or social organizations so that your child knows other children from all over the area?

Once you have looked at your own situation, you can see whether there are schools that meet your needs. Perhaps your neighborhood school is a good fit. If you are moving, neighborhood schools should be one of the first things you check when looking for a home.

There are also public schools of choice, such as magnet schools and alternative schools. Parents from all over the school district can ask to have their children attend. However, the district may have to limit enrollment because more children apply than the school can hold. For special subject magnet schools, children may have to apply and be accepted through a competitive process.

Another possibility is to send your child to a school in another neighborhood. Getting your child into one of these schools may require special effort. *Choosing a School for Your Child* has some advice on what you might do.

There are also private and church-affiliated schools in many towns that accommodate parents' differing beliefs about how their children should be educated.

Choosing a School for Your Child will help you look at the options, ask the right questions, and make your decisions.

Single copies of *Choosing a School for Your Child* are provided free as a courtesy by the United States Office of Consumer Affairs. For your free copy, send your name and address to:

Department 597V
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Pueblo, Colorado 81009

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